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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Integrating changing user behaviour into a communications strategy at Eurostat

Note by Eurostat

Summary

This document focuses on the recent and ongoing changes to Eurostat's communications strategy and actions in view of the changing behaviour of European statistics users.

Starting in January 2017, Eurostat intensified its efforts in the area of communication, recognising its crucial importance for a more efficient dissemination of data and a better understanding of the needs of users. What followed was a thorough re-thinking of Eurostat's communications approach, which continues at the same brisk pace to this day.

This document briefly outlines the changes in user behaviour which prompted the re-thinking of communications, explains the rationale behind the need to modify the way Eurostat communicates with its users, and presents communication actions introduced recently as well as Eurostat's aspirations for the future.

It is hoped that it will contribute in a meaningful way to the ongoing discussion about the importance of making official statistics better known to citizens and policymakers alike.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 1: "Strategic communications" for discussion.

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I. How has user behaviour changed?

1. The majority of today's data users are not prepared to spend a long time looking for the statistics they need. Their attention span has become significantly shorter and they expect to find what they need very quickly. Users want the data to be presented to them in an easily-digestible format, featuring less text and more accompanying infographics.

2. They also want to have an opportunity to react immediately to our data and ask questions in relation to a given data set, figure or concept. Often, they would also like to comment on the statistics they consulted, share them with friends or post a link on a social media channel of their choice.

3. This shift in user behaviour patterns has, for instance, been reflected in the decreasing numbers of downloads of complete statistical publications on Eurostat's website and the explosion in the number of mentions of Eurostat on social media.

II. Operating in a new reality

4. Due to rapid advancements in IT and new media technologies, we are currently witnessing an explosion of information, the likes of which has never been seen before.

5. Today, European citizens are universally connected and digitally aware. They have a multitude of new data sources at their disposal, access to which could not be easier or more tempting.

6. Providers of other, non-official data increasingly compete with official statisticians by producing more timely, but often less reliable information.

7. In this "post-truth" era of social media, "fake news" and "alternative facts", reliable and trustworthy official statistics are needed more than ever. It is safe to assume that their value will only increase with time.

8. However, this new reality also demands rapid and efficient responses on the part of official statistics producers. They need to evolve and change their often conventional approach to the communication of their products and services if they want to stay relevant.

9. In fact, official statisticians should strive to become better known, improve the way they explain the meaning of their work to citizens, and remind them that reliable statistics on their region, country and continent constitute an essential public service for a democratic society.

10. In other words, it is of key importance that official statistics effectively reach wider audiences and their added-value is beyond any doubt.

III. New ways to communicate statistics more effectively

11. A considerable amount of work was done in this respect by Eurostat last year and it has shown immediate and positive results. For instance, in 2017, the number of mentions of Eurostat in the media and social media went up by 16%, while the number of individual data extractions from our website went up by 12%, as compared to 2016.

12. In 2017, Eurostat started the process of renewing and overhauling its website to make it simpler, easier to use and visually more appealing, in line with its policy of making access to data easier for all users.

13. Three innovative and interactive digital publications on topics close to citizens, "The life of women and men in Europe", "Energy union" and "The digital single market" were unveiled on Eurostat's website. They met with vivid interest on the part of various user groups and the feedback received confirmed users' interest in this type of novel and interactive data presentation.

14. Due to intense reader interest, "The life of women and men in Europe" was translated into the 24 official languages of the European Union by the national statistical institutes, which only added to the uniqueness of the production processes of the official statistics in the EU.

15. Eurostat is currently working on further digital publications. The next one to be unveiled this year will focus on the Sustainable Development Goals in an EU context.

16. Last year, Eurostat also started publishing European data in a new format, which complemented its well-established news releases. A dedicated statistical news section called 'What's New?' was launched in January 2017. It features short news items published on a daily basis, written in plain English and accompanied by colourful infographics. They provide users with statistics that are easily understandable and relate directly to their daily lives.

17. Since its launch, the news section has proved extremely popular with key users, registering over 700 000 views in the first year of its operation. It has quickly become an important additional source of statistical information released by Eurostat, with news items regularly picked up by and featured in international media outlets, including European newspapers, television and radio stations and social media channels.

18. A recent review of the news section revealed that the most popular news items were nearly always data-driven and concerned topics of common interest to all Europeans, such as food prices, wage disparities and the gender pay gap in the EU. Another group of particularly popular news items included national days celebrated by EU member states and international days jointly marked across Europe, such as International Women's Day.

19. On top of over 340 statistical news items featured in the "What's New?" section, in 2017 Eurostat also issued around 200 news releases on key economic indicators. Together, they more than doubled the amount of statistical information published by Eurostat in 2016. This enabled Eurostat to significantly extend the range of topics it covered, including important international events and summits. This development was also welcomed by international news outlets, which proceeded to base a significant number of their own stories on them.

VI. Going where the users are

20. Last year, Eurostat also boosted its presence on social media. In addition to the rapidly growing popularity of its Twitter account, a Facebook account was opened, which enlarged the user base and multiplied statistical messages even further.

21. More than 800 messages were tweeted through the year, with the Twitter account gaining nearly 25 000 new followers (in March 2018, the Eurostat Twitter account counted over 116 000 followers).

22. A social media review showed that Eurostat tweets were able to reach increasingly wide audiences. For example, a tweet on regional GDP per capita gained 180 000 views and generated more than 12 000 responses from users.

23. The Facebook account also quickly proved a big success with users of Eurostat's data, with around 400 uploaded posts in 2017 and a quickly growing number of followers

(in March 2018, their number reached over 20 000). The March 2018 post on the gender pay gap registered a record 3 million views.

V. Getting to know users better

24. In line with enhancing its range of communication activities, Eurostat is always looking for fresh feedback from its users. This feedback allows it to get a better understanding of user needs and preferences, and continually improve the products and services on offer to them.

25. Last year, Eurostat commissioned a study on "user perception and communication of official statistics in the EU". One of its aims was to get a better understanding of how statistics users perceive Eurostat and official statistics in the EU in general. This was carried out in comparison with competitors from the private sector.

26. This study goes hand in hand with increased in-depth user testing taking place at the moment and intense work on the definition of the needs of specific user groups. The findings should lead to concrete actions aiming at further improvement in the way Eurostat communicates official statistics.

VI. Future point of reference

27. In today's world when anybody with internet access can convey their opinions and all sorts of unsubstantiated information to a wider public, it is becoming crucial that citizens have a trustworthy place where they can verify the claims they encountered on social media and the internet.

28. The need for reliable, objective and timely statistics which help tackle the spread of misinformation and fake news is rapidly growing in importance. Eurostat's ambition is to become a trusted source of statistics, a point of reference for users and potential users of statistical information on Europe.

29. This aspiration goes together with the need to better educate the users of official statistics. A whole range of initiatives in this area has been started by Eurostat, including a new website section called 'Statistics4beginners' and the increased use of didactic videos and webinars targeting broader segments of non-specialised users.

30. In addition, numerous presentations of Eurostat's products and services are being made on an almost daily basis, targeting various types of audiences, including journalists, students, international organisations and institutions as well as members of the public.

VII. Tradition of confidentiality and privacy

31. At this stage, it might be worth briefly highlighting some of the strengths characterising the producers of official statistics.

32. The public must be aware that Eurostat and the national statistical institutes of the European Union do not compile detailed profiles of their users, which might one day end up being sold to third parties. In fact, the ESS can be proud of the solid reputation and long experience of user data protection.

33. It might not be universally known that all data collected by Eurostat and other official European statistics producers, united in the European Statistical System, are used only for statistical purposes.

34. The privacy of data providers, such as European households, enterprises and administrations, is defined in the European Statistics Code of Practice for the National and Community Statistical Authorities, with strict statistical confidentiality guaranteed in law.

VIII. Conclusion

35. Today, it is more important than ever, that producers of official statistics take a careful look at the way they communicate with their data users. Their habits and preferences have undergone a significant shift, in keeping with the changes to the way they read and absorb information on digital devices accessing the internet.

36. Since January 2017, Eurostat has been working hard to adapt the way it communicates with users of its products and services. From the start this work has received a significant boost in the form of continuous positive feedback from both specialised and non-specialised user groups.

37. The new communication approach has also received widespread support from Eurostat's staff, whose internal buy-in was instrumental for its success. Today, Eurostat's communication team works hand-in-hand with the production units to make the presentation of their data more customer-friendly.

38. All along, Eurostat has been working closely with other members of the European Statistical System, placing great emphasis on a smooth exchange of information and the sharing of best practice in the area of communication.